university of alberta department of music

in recital

WILLIAM ALBRIGHT

Harpsichord, organ, and piano

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1986, 8:00 P.M.

Pastoral Drone — George Crumb (b. 1929)

Four Fancies for harpsichord (1979) — William Albright (b. 1944)
- Excentrique
- Mirror Bagatelle
- Musette
- Danza ostinata

Sphaera for piano and computer-generated tape (1985) — William Albright (b. 1944)

INTERMISSION

The King of Instruments: a Parade of Music and Verse (1978) — William Albright (b. 1944)

- Introduction
- The Manuals
- The Pedals
- The Flues
- The Mixtures
- The Flutes
- The Prinicpals
- The Sesquialtera
- The Reeds
- The Clarion and the Fagott
- The Gamba
- The Celeste

The Organist

William Meilen, narrator

St Louis Blues — W. C. Handy, arr. by Fats Waller

Technical production by Garth Hobden

Murtagh-McFarlane Concert Management

convocation hall, old arts building

PROGRAM NOTES

by William Albright

PASTORAL DRONE, by George Crumb, was conceived as an evocation of an ancient "open-air" music in one continuous movement. The underpinning of the work is provided by relentless drones executed on the pedals. The periodic "bending" of the basic drone sound (a lower D-sharp and a higher G-sharp) announces the principal structural articulations of the work. The drone is overlaid by strident, sharply-etched rhythms in the hands and the dynamic throughout is sempre fortissimo ("boldly resounding"). The characteristic sound of Pastoral Drone will suggest a kind of colossal musette. The work was commissioned by the American Guild of Organists and was premiered at their National Convention of 1984 in San Francisco. I provided registration and editorial assistance.

FOUR FANCIES for Harpsichord, commissioned by Douglas Reed with a grant from the Mesker Trust Fund of Evansville, Indiana, was written while I was in residence at the American Academy in Rome, 1979. The title of the suite evokes the fancies (fantasies) of 17th-century English keyboard music; and it provides four distinct approaches to idiomatic writing for the instrument.

The first movement, "Excentrique", is not so much like the character piano pieces by such Romantic composers as Moskowski and Grieg, as it is like a French overture, complete with extravagant ornaments and obsessive dotted rhythms. The piece is to be played "pompously, on the border of sanity." The second movement, "A Mirror Bagatelle" (pun intended), exploits the harpsichord's two manuals and its ability to provide the same pitches with different colors and timing -- in a word, heterophony.

"Musette" is the French word for bagpipes; it is also a typical movement of a Baroque suite. The last movement, "Danza ostinata," owes its existence to several predecessors: Near-Eastern music, Boogie-woogie, the Spanish composer Soler and Terry Riley. The harpsichord is a superb rhythm instrument because of its strongly accented timbre. For this reason, the harpsichord sounds best when it is made to dance.

Overall, the key relationships among the four movements -- C, G, F, C -- form a neatly classical design.

SPHAERA ("sphere" in English) is the product of a commission from the MIT Experimental Music Studio, made possible by a New Works grant from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities. I created the work's computer part this winter, using the computer facilities of the MIT Studio.

The work came about as a result of a challenge, through the commission, to deal with the electronic music medium that I had neglected for some fourteen years (Organbook II, with its movement Last Rites, was my last major attempt in synthesized sound). Perhaps the continuing maturity of the computer music field, perhaps the attraction of composing for the brilliant pianist David Burge, led me to accept the task.

The piece itself, in five sections and almost thirteen minutes in duration, explores the capacity of computer-generated sound to produce "super-human" results--in other words, its great access to spirituality and the divine. There exist in this piece at least three examples of this:

SPHAERA continued

(1) in the first and fourth sections, sonorities which serve as extensions of two kinds of unique piano resonances -- one high, the other low and muted -- attain a timeless quality beyond the capability of any single acoustic instrument or voice, with the possible exception of the organ;
(2) in the scherzo-like fourth section, piano-like sounds are unleashed at furious, almost devilish speed, confronting and taunting the pianist; and
(3) throughout the piece, the ability of the tape music to position itself in two dimensions of the concert space through four channel reproduction is exploited, often in significant structural ways.

Sphaera seems obsessed with two pitches in particular registers: an F-sharp in the highest octave of the piano and a low A-natural in the lowest full octave on the keyboard. These two pitches can be visualized as points on the opposite sides of a shape's circumference--for example, on a circle or sphere. Notes inside the two poles can be imagined as defining central points of odd-shaped ellipses or of distorted, amoeba-like forms. Notes outside those poles could be considered the sonic metaphor for a planet's rings. The connection with astronomy is not coincidental, as I hope I have captured a bit of the sense of musica mundi ("music of the spheres") explained by medieval theorists. I believe synthesized music may well work best when yearning for the ineffable.

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of the staff of the MIT Experimental Studio for making this project possible, and I wish to particularly express my gratitude to Keith Hamel and Miller Puckette, assistants to the work.

THE KING OF INSTRUMENTS, a parade of music and verse for organ and narrator, is an affectionate parody of the world of the pipe organ and the organist. There are, perhaps, some relatively obscure references to organ lore, but since the intent is entertainment, not didactics, it will help the listener's appreciation not a whit to understand exactly what they are.

For those who insist, however, the text does include some recitations of organ parts, such as the MANUALS -- that is, the organ keyboards bearing such names as Great, Positiv and Swell --and pipe classifications -- the brassy REEDS, for example, and the remainder of the pipework, the FLUES.

There are also many citations of stop-names. The MIXTURES are stops consisting of two or more ranks of pipes that sound high harmonics, while the SESQUIALTERA is a two-rank stop sounding lower harmonics and used mainly to produce an interesting solo colour in combination with other stops. The CLARION and the FAGGOTT are two reed stops, the former typically trumpet-like, the latter, somewhat like a loud bassoon (the German and Italian words for bassoon are respectively Faggott and fagotto). The GAMBA is a "string" sound on the organ, and the CELESTE is a combination of two ranks of pipes, one slightly off-tune, to produce a warm, undulating effect.

The verse was written over a period of several months from 1977-1978 in collaboration with the poet Eugene Haun, a poet at Eastern Michigan University. The music was written rapidly in a few weeks, and was premiered shortly thereafter by the organist David Craighead at the inaugeration of the new organ at Sacred Heart Church at the University of Notre Dame. The builder of this organ, Walter Holtkamp, Jr., commissioned the work.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER

WILLIAM ALBRIGHT (born 1944, Gary, Indiana) has concertized widely in Europe, Canada, and the United States, specializing in concerts of new music for organ and piano. Although he has premiered over thirty new works written by American and European composers, he is also widely known as an interpreter of classic ragtime and early jazz styles such as Harlem stride and boogie-woogie.

Albright is probably best known for his keyboard works, though he has produced works for almost every medium, several which involve electronic, visual and theatrical elements. His church music, original in style, has also won enthusiasm. He has been the recipient of many commissions and awards, among them The Queen Marie-Jose Prize (for Organbook I), an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Fulbright and Guggenheim Fellowships, a Symphonic Composition Award, two National Endowment for the Arts grants, and two Koussevitzky Composition Awards. In 1979 he held the post, Composer-in-Residence at the American Academy in Rome; in the same year, his composition Stipendium peccati was selected as a United States entry for the International Society of Contemporary Music. A recording of his work for solo piano, Five Chromatic Dances, was selected in 1981 as the entry in the UNESCO-International Rostrum of Composers.

William Albright has been composer-in-residence or guest composer for a number of schools and festivals, including the University of Southern California, the University of Wisconsin at River Falls, the University of Colorado and for Portland, Oregon Summer Concerts. A superb concert organist, he has been guest artist at the Vienna International Organ-Art Festival, two national conventions of the American Guild of Organists, the Hartt College International Festival of Contemporary Organ Music, The University of Nebraska Symposium on the Organ, and The New Music Americana Festival. In 1985 he was guest artist for the Sinzig (Germany) Festival of "Organ Music since 1980." His teachers have included Ross Lee Finney, Olivier Messiaen, George Rochberg and Aaron Copland in composition, while he cites Marilyn Mason as his principal organ teacher.

Albright is presently Professor of Music Composition at The University of Michigan, where he is also Associate Director of the Electronic Music Studio. In 1973 he was honored with a Distinguished Service Award from that institution. He is currently completing an opera, The Magic City, a commission from the University's School of Music. Albright has pursued research in live electronic music, and his organ commissioning series, started in 1975, has already made substantial contributions to the literature for that instrument.

Organ works composed by William Albright are available on CRI, Nonesuch, and Crystal recordings. A contract with Musical Heritage Society has already produced four piano records -- notably the music of James P. Johnson and Albright's own "rag" composition. Albright also appears as performer or composer on Advance, Crystal, Grennadilla, Trilogy, Opus One and five other CRI releases. His compositions are published principally by C. F. Peters, Elkan-Vogel, Jobert (Presser) and E. B. Marks.